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10 August 1988

BURMA: Antigovernment Protests

Bloody antigovernment protests that began last week in Burma continue and harsh measures employed by the government, including deadly force by the Army, are serving to escalate the unrest. As of Wednesday, government efforts to bring the rioting under control have been unsuccessful.

- o Antigovernment protests have spread from the capital of Rangoon to as many as 30 towns. Western diplomats believe that press reports of up to 200 demonstrators killed and over 1400 detained by security forces are credible, though Rangoon reports far fewer casualties. Government officials imposed a dusk-to-dawn curfew in Rangoon and outlawed gatherings of more than five people.
- o The protests have expanded beyond student-led demonstrations and now involve nearly every sector of Burmese society, including the outlawed Burma Communist Party. For example, 15,000 demonstrators, including several thousand monks, protested at the home of newly appointed Socialist Party Chairman Sein Lwin (pronounced Sin Lewin') early this week.
- o Conspicuously absent is any attempt by the government to address the public in a conciliatory way, to meet with students and other organizers, or to try to defuse the situation except by force and transparent ploys.
- o Rangoon announced a 10- to 20-percent increase in government wages and a small increase in the minimum wage in an attempt to rally support for the government among public employees, many of whom have encouraged the demonstrators and whose children are among the student rioters. Rangoon is also giving emergency food aid to poor families in order to discourage them from participating in the demonstrations.

The demonstrators are demanding political and economic reforms and the ouster of Sein Lwin, who replaced Ne Win two weeks ago after his twenty six years in power. Much of their discontent stems from deep-seated animosity toward Sein Lwin, particularly for his role in suppressing student-led demonstrations in March and June this year, and from rising expectations of greater political and economic freedoms once Ne Win stepped down.

- o According to press reports, as many as 100 people were killed and up to 5,000 arrested in the government crackdown following rioting in March, and an estimated 200 people died in rioting in June.

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